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Defining Ethnology and Religious Science (Book Review)

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Defining Ethnology and Religious Science, I.J. van der Walt, Universum (Potchefstroom, Republic of South Africa), 1982. 176 pages. R 7, 50. (price). Reviewed by Fred J. De Jong, Instructor of Sociology and Social Work.

The study of religion has long been a factious endeavor. Beginning as long ago as Herodotus and Cicero, through the Christian-dominated Middle-Ages, and to the more recent philosophers such as Kant, Schleiermacher and Hegel, the study of religion has sparked emotional debate. From Dr. van der Walt's perspective, this debate has perhaps produced more heat than light. Dr. van der Walt, a Professor in Missiology and Evangelism at Potchefstroom University in South Africa, believes that much of what is true and important in religion has been mistreated or overlooked and that a distinct science of religion is badly needed.

The problem, according to the author, is that the study of religion is primarily dealt with by anthropology. The result is that religion is reduced to one anthropological denominator, and as such, its practices and other cultural manifistations are studied in detail. Unfortunately the study of the religion itself—its content, origin, role and relation to other science—is neglected.

Throughout the analysis, van der Walt contends that

> although the Bible is not a textbook for Ethnology (Anthropology) or Science of Religion, it nevertheless contains principles and points of departure which have to be taken into account and assimilated in the avenue of the respective sciences. (Preface)

As a Reformed scholar, van der Walt matter-of-factly states that "evaluation" in any discipline is "inevitable" and should be based on principles given on Scripture (p. 17).

Quite naturally, then, the author proposes a radically different definition of religion from that of anthropology. Borrowing from H. Bavinck, van der Walt proposes that religion is the "inwardly experienced community between God and His creature" (p. 6). Revelation becomes a key concept of religion, which really is "man's answer and reaction to revelation" (p. 6).

What a contrast to the dominant approach to religion, which is regarded by anthropologists as only a part of human culture and a product of cultural activity. Early twentieth century anthropologist B. Malenowski was extremely influential with his research of primitive cultures. He concluded that

> belief in immortality is the deep need to overcome the fear of personal destruction . . . (and is) determined by the cultural factors of cooperation and by the growth of human sentiments in the comradeship of joint work, and joint responsibility (p. 8).

The author chronicles similar postulates regarding the origin of religion. Religion is variously blamed on "linguistic poverty where powers and phenomena of nature were personified" (Max Muller) to primitive animism (E.B. Taylor), to dialectic materialism of Marxist and evolutionists, to French structuralism as posited by E. Durkheim.

Structuralism is representative of the dominant approach to religion, conceived as originating "in the recurrent experiences by which humans feel the force and majesty of the social group . . . (and) Soul is the totemistic projection of the class (p. 21)." A supreme being is part of time and space and emerges from man and his relations. Religion becomes just a social fact which persists because of its useful function for social integration.

The Christian scholar's evaluation of these perspectives can rest on the verity of revelation, so that these current analyses of religion can and should be recognized as part of mankind's distorted reaction to God's revelation. In fact, by treating religion as a cultural artifact and denying any claim to uniqueness and revelation, anthropology joined forces with evolutionary theory and Social Darwinism to, unwittingly or not, help lay the basis for the post-Christian era.

To more accurately understand the true value and role of religion, van der Walt suggests that the field of ethnology (used as a synonym with anthropology) should focus on the meaning of religion for "peoplehood." How does religion contribute to the conception of unity, tradition, culture, self-awareness, and feelings of distinctiveness? In a positive sense, how does religion help preserve and build appreciation for one's culture? And what role does religion play in shaping attitudes toward life, in explaining man's "service-motive" to help others and in the human struggle to find tranquility of mind? Such topics illustrate the legitimate study of religion and its cultural implications.

Just as ethnology (anthropology) needs scripturally-based evaluation and restructuring, so does the study of religion—alternately termed the "science of religion" or "religiology." For too long the science of religion has been confused with philosophy and theology, when its treatment belongs in neither camp. The author argues that

> This theory of religion deals with religion not as philosophy in its universal-perspective but as a phenomenon as such . . . philosophy of religion has the task to look at religion in its cosmic relation . . . (and) the place of religion in that vast greatness. (p. 40)

Neither is the study of religion the same as the study of theology. Dr. van der Walt contends that

> Theology studies the revelation of God. Not God but His revelation. In this sense there is an Islam, Hindu, etc., theology because what it studies is accepted as being revealed by a god. (p. 40)

Instead, the science of religion "collects, controls and classifies" material regarding religion and develops a "complete theoretical approach to what religion really is" (p. 41). Its beginning assumption is that "all religion is the response to revelation, be it a sound or an unsound response" (p. 41). Consequently, all theories of religion not based on the concept of "transcendental origin" as Scripture reveals, stand diametrically opposed to a true understanding of religion. In this sense, van der Walt reclaims the critical role of Christianity in society, rejects the reduction of religion to a cultural artifact, and substitutes a standard of truth in place of widespread cultural relativism. In concrete terms, the science of religion would take up such topics as the nature of religious experience, the expression of religious thought, and religious actions, e.g. worship, sacraments, purification and fellowship.

The author continues to develop this premise in subsequent chapters, the most interesting of which provides "ethnoreligiological" insights into African religion. Colonialism, nationalism, tribal customs and Westernization of the African Christian church are discussed. Separatist church movements, animism, excessive "missionary-centeredness," and the alienation of the church from its non-Christian milieu are identified as serious and continuing problems. Dr. van der Walt makes a call to "africanize" the church—"wrap the churches in Africa in such a robe that it fits in the milieu where they are allowed to take root in the soil of African culture in which they are planted" (p. 72).

Defining Ethnology and Religious Science has accurately pinpointed the poverty of the anthropological treatment of religion and has contributed to furthering Reformed scholarship in the study of religion. While the analysis is insightful, the presentation is marred by an unnecessarily heavy use of jargon and a difficult writing style. Nearly every page exhibits numerous one-and-two-line paragraphs which neither fully develop the author's thought nor give the reader the rationale for subsequent conclusions. As a result the narrative is choppy with many abrupt transitions. The book is difficult reading for all except the highly motivated and well-versed. Although the text is extensively footnoted and accompanied by a complete bibliography, its professional appearance is damaged by publication errors (there are two page 19's, 20's, 61's and 62's). Dr. van der Walt has contributed some significant insights; unfortunately, only the most determined readers will be able to understand and appreciate his argument.